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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: AFGHAN REFUGEE UPDATE

REFTEL: DUSHANBE 564

11. SUMMARY: According to government data through August, the number of new arrivals claiming asylum in Tajikistan, mainly from Afghanistan, had reached 957 persons, 212 more than in all of 2007. UNHCR reports that the Tajik government is denying status to a higher percentage of refugees often for vague reasons and that many refugee children are working rather than attending school. The increased numbers, coupled with the perceived deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, have raised concerns among both UNHCR staff and international development organizations in Tajikistan.  
END SUMMARY.

12. On October 9, Emboff met with Ilija Todorovic, UNHCR representative to Tajikistan, and Benjamin Phillips, Central Asia Director of Save the Children, to discuss the current refugee situation. According to official statistics provided by the Government of Tajikistan, there are 1,584 refugees and 231 asylum seekers currently in country. UNHCR reports that 501 persons approached their office since January, 327 of whom had arrived in 12008. Almost all of those who approached UNHCR are ethnic Tajik Afghan nationals, with only eight cases (46 persons) of Hazara ethnicity, four cases (22 persons) of Pashtun ethnicity, and two Sri Lankans. Government data also indicates refugees from Iran, Iraq, Cameroon and Nigeria in country. UNHCR reports that reasons given by refugees for leaving Afghanistan include: forced marriage; general insecurity; health issues; reunification with prior refugee cases; conflict with armed groups and/or the Taliban; land, property or heritage issues; personal enmity; kidnapping; and, increasingly, work with international organizations. Todorovic projected that Tajikistan would see nearly 1,300 newcomers this year.

13. Both Todorovic and Phillips expressed concern at the growing number of refugee children working instead of attending school. According to Todorovic, there are a "surprising" number of Afghan refugee children working in the local markets and bazaars, mainly as porters for customers and vendors. An asylum seeker is not legally authorized to work until accorded refugee status by the government. The process, which can drag through administrative appeals processes and court hearings if denied, means that even those refugees who arrive in Tajikistan with some means to support themselves find that lifeline quickly runs out.

14. Todorovic noted that the percentage of asylum seekers actually accepted by the government has been decreasing, from 40% in 2007 to nearly 20% now. This, according to Todorovic, is putting a strain on the local NGOs that provide legal counseling that UNHCR works with, as they then file appeals for the denied asylum seekers. Reasons for denial are often vague and difficult to counter, such as speaking out against the government of Tajikistan. Another reason often given is the violation of the government resolutions

prohibiting the settlement of refugees in the urban areas of Dushanbe and Khujand. Investigators head to where the asylum seeker claims to live, and when they discover, as is almost always the case, that the person is actually living in Dushanbe, the asylum petition is subsequently denied.

¶5. Afghan refugees, however, continue to head directly for Dushanbe.

In an effort to get around the prohibition of living in the city, a large community of Afghans has sprung up in Vakhdat, a small town about 20 kilometers east of Dushanbe. UNHCR knows of 260 refugee families who settled there last year. Todorovic claimed that the "capacity" of Vakhdat to absorb more refugees is wearing thin. UNHCR is hearing of more Afghans settling in Gissor, to the south-west of Dushanbe. UNHCR currently does not have a local presence in that area.

¶6. According to UNHCR, the government continues to defend the ban on refugee settlement in Dushanbe and Khujand. They claim overcrowding, increased crime, and displacement of Tajik citizens from markets as reasons they must keep the prohibition in place. Less often mentioned, according to Todorovic, but likely the overriding concern, is the fear on the part of Tajik authorities that when (not if) the security situation in Afghanistan completely collapses, Dushanbe will become a destination for thousands of refugees because there will be an established community here.

¶7. Both Phillips and Todorovic pressed the need for preemptive action to prevent the deteriorating situation that refugees in Tajikistan currently face. The lack of social services, education, health services, trauma counseling, psychological assistance and basic shelter for many of the new arrivals will only be compounded

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should the numbers keep increasing. Both expressed their concern that violence in Afghanistan is increasing, that the definition of the Taliban is changing to include all opposition to the state, that international organizations are being increasingly targeted (and are indeed resettling their own staff within Afghanistan) as factors that demonstrate that the numbers will continue to rise. Although he had no firm numbers at the meeting, Todorovic also stated that they were seeing increased numbers arriving from southern Afghanistan, a group that had previously headed to Pakistan for refuge.

¶8. Todorovic ended the meeting by stressing that UNHCR itself was not looking for more funding outside of established channels. Rather, he and Phillips wanted to make sure that post was aware of the situation and could help target funding directly to the local implementers, such as the legal service NGOs. Todorovic again expressed his appreciation for the FY08 Taft Fund grant that post received to renovate three schools in Dushanbe. That grant focused on the long-staying refugee population, those that had been in Tajikistan for more than 15 years. Only recently have the new arrivals garnered attention. The integration of the long-stayers into Tajik society remains a priority of the UNHCR office in Tajikistan (reftel), and could provide a basis for the further integration of new arrivals if successful. In the meantime, there is an acute fear of an impending humanitarian crisis in Tajikistan this coming winter, which will impact refugee populations that much more seriously and impair the ability of Tajik society to absorb refugees.

JACOBSON